DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 228 871 FL 013 643

AUTHOR Walsh, Catherine E.
TITLE The Construction of Meaning in a Second Language: The Polemics of Family and School.
PUB DATE Oct 82
NOTE 11p.; Revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Boston University Conference on Language Development (7th, Boston, MA, October 8-10, 1982).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Biculturalism; Bilingual Education; Cross Cultural Studies; *Culture Conflict; Elementary Education; *English (Second Language); *Puerto Ricans; *Semantics; Sociocultural Patterns; Spanish Speaking; Values

ABSTRACT

Sociocultural and psychological processes are involved in a person's acquisition of meaning. In the case of the Spanish speaking child who is learning English in the United States in a school environment and who lives in a Spanish speaking environment at home, there is a conflict of perspectives on reality. The acquisition of new culture and language has as much potential for bringing psychological stress and destruction of the child's sense of well being as it does for creating a bilingual/bicultural individual. Preliminary data from a study in progress, along with examples, clarify the discussion of the differential effect of home and school on the Puerto Rican child's semantic system in each language and culture. The question is whether, in the case of the Hispanic, the English and Spanish language systems depict a reality which is in coexistence or in conflict with the surrounding world. It seems that, as acquisition progresses, context begins to take precedence over language of presentation. The child will begin to rely on the English language context to derive meaning, and may begin to acquire the dominant culture's opinions of the minority group to which the child belongs. (Author/AMH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED228871

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE: THE POLEMICS OF FAMILY AND SCHOOL*

By Catherine E. Walsh
University of Massachusetts at Amherst

ABSTRACT:

This paper addresses the nature of the sociocultural and psychological processes involved in the Spanish speaking child's acquisition of abstract meaning in the English language. Discussion focuses on the differential effect of home and school on the child's semantic system in each language and whether, in the case of the Hispanic, the systems depict a reality which is in coexistence or conflict with the surrounding world. Preliminary data from a study the author is currently conducting is used to help clarify theoretical arguments.

*Revised version of paper presented at the Seventh Annual Boston University Conference on Language Development, October 9, 1982.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Catherine Walsh

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

FL013 643

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE: THE POLEMICS OF FAMILY AND SCHOOL

Catherine E. Walsh
University of Massachusetts at Amherst

This paper is built on the premise that language and culture are inextricably linked. The major concern is the process by which the Spanish speaking child acquires and uses meaning in the English language and how the child relates this new culturally determined meaning to his or her native language (semantic) reality.

The formation of meaning and its subsequent attachment to lexical items is at the center of this acquisition process. Early meanings, based on individual, contextual, and situational experiences may not comply with those of the adult community but with time are altered and transformed to become more consonant with those in the child's circumventing world. Through the medium of language, the child constructs a reality, a classification of meaning embedded in the sociocultural and historical conditions. While the child's growing knowledge of and constant interaction with the environment acts as the force which structures these concepts and guides this meaning, class, culture, and social membership help determine the actual makeup of the emerging semantic structure. The child's construction of the semantic system and his or her construction of the social system take place side by side as two aspects of a single unitary process (Halliday, 1975).

Language's social function, that of communication, is explicitly tied to the psychological---the complex system of meaning classification in semantic memory. Combined, the sociocultural and the psychological form the individual's day-to-day reality (i.e., the conceptual-behavioral

domain which is mapped into linguistic forms which serve as the speech code shared by a given community).

As the phenomenologist Joseph Church (1961) has explained:

> All human beings live in and respond to the same concrete reality. They differ, however, according to cultural and individual background, in the perspective they have on reality, in the features of reality which to them are prominent or obscure, in their sensitivity to the multitudinous possible attributes of reality, and in the connections which they establish between objects, particularly the degree to which explicit causal chains supplant dynamic connections.

These connections are most often expressed in the guise of lexical items or words.

The communicative use of words in a designated speech community presupposes a common system of conceptual referents, or shared word meanings, grounded in our relation /to one another/ as subjects and in our relation to the objects or concepts concerned (Bologh, 1979). Much of this commonality of meaning which we share is based on an American English language reality---a reality which most of us acquired in the home and neighborhood and which was later reinforced in the school. What would have happened, however, if the language domains had not matched? In other words, what if the sociocultural factors inherent in our mother tongue had somehow differed or interfered with the language employed in the educational setting?

Clarke (1976) has described such a situation as "a clash of conscious-

ness, in which double bind phenomena are viewed as the result of differences between culturally determined definitions of reality." The particular case of the Spanish speaking Puerto Rican child in the United States seems to be a clear example of what Clarke was talking about.

As an ethnic minority from a mother tongue and culture of limited or low prestige (Seda, n.d.), the Puerto Rican child's "place" in the second (majority) language and culture is partly predetermined and his or her dual social meaning system already partially conceived. Each language form is associated with certain resources and elements of power (Bisseret, 1979). Within the cultural context of the neighborhood or family, the Puerto Rican child is able to employ his or her native language with confidence, assurance, and ease. This same language in the context of the general society, however, often lacks the same affirmation and pride. The bilingual, as a member of two groups, must use the language and behavior specific to each context. As a member of a minority group, however, he or she, in most cases, remains marginal to the majority, socially, culturally, and linguistically (Seda, n.d.). Characteristics of ethnicity (and often class) may force the Puerto Rican child to maintain differential membership in two cultures (and, as a consequence, in two languages) affecting both the speech form itself and the construction and organization of meaning.

As Elam (1972) explains, divergent rates of language learning act as cues to the general level of the child's emotional adjustment and the resolution of cultural identification and conflicts. Because many Hispanic children are monolingual when they enter U.S. schools, the educational system provides the physical and psychological setting for English language

acquisition. In this context, the retention and development of the native language is seldom considered. The move is for languages and cultures to assimilate and merge, while English, the "common tie", takes over as the dominant force. As both the language of instruction and the language of communication with in-school peers, English occupies a majority of the child's speaking and listening day. The parent, who played the primary role in socializing and transmitting culture and language to the child, can no longer command his or her child's involvement (Elam, 1972). In time, the native language assumes only an "intimacy" or family-related function while English becomes the language of education and general societal use. The child is placed in the midst of two very different realities.

> When internal relations are mediated by something external, they become external and indifferent to each other. The external mediation produces a contradictory form of life: a divided subjectivity in which one side negates the other (Bologh, 1979).

For the Puerto Rican child, the acquisition of the new culture and language has as much the potential of bringing psychological stress and destruction of the child's sense of self and wellbeing, as it does for creating a bilingual/bicultural individual. The question then, in the context of this paper, is how semantic memory (and, in turn, the lexicon) deals with the development of this two language,two culture creation.

In acquiring a second language, the individual structures and interprets experiences in the second language world in terms of categories derived from the native language and culture together with perceptions of linguistic and cultural phenomena in the second language environment

(Strick, 1980). The process involved in the interrelation of the bilingual's two languages might be encompassed in the term "lexical disambiguation" which, according to Miller (1978), refers to the use of context (the immediate linguistic context, the discourse context, and the situation in which communication occurs) in enabling individuals to recognize which meaning a word may express on a particular occasion. Each concept, as Miller explains, has associated with it a set of contextual features as well as a lexical entry. In the fluent bilingual, concepts must have associated lexical entries in each language and attached cultural, contextual, and general world knowledge cues.

We could envision, then, a semantic memory structure which hierarchically organizes information into a network-like system from which linguistic (i.e., social, cultural, psychological) reality is drawn. For concrete concepts, general world knowledge would, in most cases, suffice in providing an adequate definition. So that for example, with lexical items such as table and mesa, a flat surfaced four legged prototype would be accessed with no specific language-cultural differentiation. With abstract, culturally defined concepts, however, bilingual memory organization becomes increasingly complex.

In responding to foreign abstract concepts in a new language, the learner typically employs context, then relates the lexical item to its translation equivalent in the native language. Because most concrete terms can be translated without a loss in meaning, the individual with limited second language and cultural contact presumes with other concepts he or she can do the same (see example 1 below).[1]

---

[1] These examples are taken from a study the author is undertaking in a Massachusetts city with a large Hispanic population. Subjects are fourth grade Puerto Rican students representative of four levels of bilingual ability

Example 1A: Estos niños no son familiares.

Maria: They don't look like each other.

Miguel: They're friends. They're not the same.

Carlos: Hay una gente que es inglés y otra español.

Juan: Son amigos. They're not family.

In the particular case of Example 1A, children were individually presented a picture of three children, two Hispanic and one Anglo, with their arms around each other on the school playground. They were asked to respond to the statement "Estos niños no son familiares. Porque?" . (Literal translation: These children are not familiar. Why?). Response language was specified in half the cases as Spanish and half as English. All subjects respond to the Spanish lexical item familiar as a referent to family, regardless of specified language of response.

Given a picture of two Hispanic children doing math homework outside on the grass and the English sentence "These are two familiar children", all respond to context (see Example 1B below). While Carlos and Miguel seem to rely primarily on what is happening in the picture, Juan, who is fluent in English, adds a reference to physical features--- a possible allusion to the fact that the children are physically similar and therefore possibly related. Rosa, who dominates in Spanish, makes immediate referal to her native language referent, then comments on setting. No one used familiar in the Webster dictionary sense of intimate or acquainted.

Example 1B: These are two familiar children.

Carlos: Doing homework.

Juan: Maybe doing homework or something outside. Oh, because their hands are black and white.

Miguel: Estan dibujando. Estan haciendo trabajo.

Rosa: Ellos pueden ser hermanos o primos y ellos estan haciendo el homework que la maestra les dio.

The second set of examples focuses on the lexical item educado or educated, a word that in Spanish has strong connotations of respect and politeness. When the item was presented with pictures in the context of a school setting (see Examples 2A and 2B), Edgar, who has a good command of English, makes reference to both school and home (i.e., Spanish) related meanings. Luis, on the other hand, who is Spanish dominant, focuses on the context of the picture.

Example 2A: Esta niña es muy educada.(school)

Edgar: She learns alot. She does everything she's supposed to in school.

Luis: Ella lea muchos libros.

Example 2B: This boy is very educated.(school)

Edgar: He's paying attention. He's doing his work.

Luis: Esta alzando la mano.

In Examples 2C and 2D, subjects were presented with images depicting Hispanic individuals in the home. The context of the picture, in both cases, appears to dominate over the language of presentation. All responses focus on the typical Spanish meaning.

Example 2C: This girl is not well educated.(home)

Manuel: She doesn't have respect.

Maria: Ella es mala. Ella no es buena como otra gente.

Example 2D: Esta es una familia bien educada. (home)

Maria: Que no se ensucien cuando comen.

Noemi: No se comen con los dedos como otra gente.

While these few examples represent only a very small portion of posible language/meaning usage in the Puerto Rican child, they do reflect much more general lexical/semantic relations. In the early stages of second language acquisition, the child makes constant reference to his or her primary language and culture. As acquisition progresses, however, context begins to take precedence over language of presentation. The child presented with a sentence in Spanish which makes reference to school will, as he or she approaches bilingual fluency, begin to rely on the English language context to derive meaning. Spanish referents become a secondary source. Although the child is deriving lexical meaning from an interdependent semantic system, the increase of English language use and episodic context causes an eventual shift in ease (and preference) in language access (Walsh, forthcoming).

In this process, the realities of home and school, for many Puerto Rican children, move further and further apart. The child gradually begins to disassociate himself or herself from the family, culture, and from his or her own personal identity until, as some of the children in my sample when asked to respond to a picture of Puerto Ricans in the home expressed, "A Puerto Rican is sad." "A Puerto Rican is lazy." "A Puerto Rican hace lo que da la gana." "A Puerto Rican is a Black man that speaks Spanish."

REFERENCES

Bisseret, N. 1979. Education, Class Language and Ideology. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Bologh, R.W. 1979. Dialectical Phenomenology: Marx's Method. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Church, J. 1961. Language and the Discovery of Reality. New York: Random House.

Clarke, M.A. 1976. Second langauge acquisition as a clash of consciousness. Language Learning, 26: 377-390.

Elam, S.E. 1972. Acculturation and learning problems of Puerto Rican children. The Puerto Rican Community and its Children on the Mainland. F. Cordasco and E. Bucchioni (Eds.). Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press.

Halliday, M.A.K. 1975. Learning How to Mean: Explorations in the Development of Language. London: Edward Arnold Publishers.

Miller, G.A. 1978. Semantic relations among words. Linguistic Theory and Psychological Reality. M. Halle, J. Bresnan, and G.A. Miller (Eds.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Seda, E. Imperatives in ethnic minority education. Unpublished paper. New York: Hunter College, Department of Puerto Rican Studies.

Strick, G.J. 1980. A hypothesis for semantic development in a second language. Language Learning, 30: 155-176.

Walsh, C.E. The phenomena of educated/educado: an example for a tripartite system of semantic memory. Bilingual Review (forthcoming).